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NARRATIVE AND LETTER OF
WILLIAM HENRY TRESCOT
CONCERNING THE NEGOTIATIONS
BETWEEN SOUTH CAROLINA
AND PRESIDENT BUCHANAN,
IN DECEMBER, 1860

CONTRIBUTED BY
GAILLARD HUNT

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DOCUMENTS

*Narrative and Letter of William Henry Trescot, concerning the
Negotiations between South Carolina and President
Buchanan in December, 1860.*

WILLIAM HENRY TRESCOT was born in Charleston, South Carolina, November 22, 1822, and when he was thirty years old was appointed Secretary of Legation at London, serving for two years, when he returned to Charleston and entered upon the practice of law. He also wrote on diplomatic and international subjects on which he soon became recognized as an authority.

In 1852 appeared his book, *The Diplomacy of the Revolution; an Historical Study* (New York), and in 1857 *The Diplomatic History of the Administrations of Washington and Adams* (Boston). He had planned the writing of a complete diplomatic history of the United States, dividing it into four parts—the period of the Revolution, from Washington to Jefferson, from Jefferson to Monroe's declaration, and from Monroe to his own time. The enduring value of the only two volumes he completed must cause regret that circumstances drew him away from carrying out his project.

His volume of the *Diplomatic History of the Administrations of Washington and Adams* was still fresh from the press when President Buchanan invited him to occupy the congenial and dignified office of Assistant Secretary of State.

The President regarded the place as one of great importance, for he was aware that Lewis Cass, whom he appointed to be Secretary of State, was indisposed to responsibility and not possessed of the peculiar talents necessary to make a shining success in the office he called him to fill.¹ But Cass had a large following and brought support to the Administration; and Trescot's appointment also meant more than merely bringing his individual talents into the service of the government, for he represented in a notable degree the ruling class of South Carolina and South Carolina represented and led the advanced school of slavery and states'-rights sentiment in the South. Himself of one of the old patrician families of the state, his marriage to Miss Eliza Natalie Cuthbert had widened

¹ See Curtis's *Buchanan*, II. 399.

and confirmed his family influence, and family influence counted for much in this unique commonwealth. He had a house in Charleston where his law office was, a farm in the up-country at Pendleton and an island on the coast which had come down to his wife by royal grant of George III.

It cannot be truthfully said that the service which he found himself performing soon after he became Assistant Secretary of State came wholly as a surprise to him, for in the dedication of his *Diplomatic History* written in 1857 he had spoken gloomily of the "miserable dissension" then distracting the country, and his knowledge of the sentiment of the people of his state must have prepared him for what happened. How he became the unaccredited envoy of South Carolina near the government of the United States conducting negotiations upon the adjustment of which seemed to hang the fate of the nation and of his state is explained in the narrative which follows and which in its original form has never before seen the light of day. It was written in February, 1861, immediately after Mr. Trescot returned to South Carolina to cast in his fortunes with his native state. Ten years later (in 1871) using this account as the basis he wrote a second narrative, which some years afterwards he lent to General Samuel Wylie Crawford under stipulation and restrictions as to its use which the borrower failed to observe, and a part of it was printed in General Crawford's book *The Genesis of the Civil War: the Story of Sumter* (New York, 1887). The original narrative has never been heretofore printed.

During the Civil War Mr. Trescot served in the legislature, as a member of the executive council of South Carolina and as a colonel on the staff of General Roswell S. Ripley, C. S. A.; but in his chosen field, where he was a master and where his talents would have been of greatest avail to the Confederate government, he was given no opportunity to perform any service, being prevented by the same cause which obscured so much of the best talent of the South when it was most needed. In common with many other Southerners he was not in sympathy with Jefferson Davis and held him in slight esteem, and Davis made no effort to make use of him in his administration.

The war having closed Mr. Trescot came to Washington, which he made his chief place of residence until a few years before his death, when he retired to Pendleton where he died May 4, 1898. During the years of his residence in Washington he performed much service for the government, all of the highest order, and occasionally con-

tributed able and suggestive articles to the magazines. The complete list of the public offices he held follows, with dates of appointment: secretary of legation at London, December 30, 1852; assistant secretary of state, June 11, 1860; commissioner to China to negotiate treaty, April 9, 1880 (he signed the treaty); special envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary to Chile, November 28, 1881; commissioner to negotiate commercial treaty with Mexico, August 7, 1882 (he signed the treaty); delegate to Pan-American Conference, April 2, 1889; counsel for the United States before the Halifax Fishery Commission in 1877.

The following is a partial list of his writings. Books: *The Diplomacy of the Revolution; an Historical Study* (New York, 1852); *The Diplomatic History of the Administrations of Washington and Adams, 1789-1801* (Boston, 1857). Pamphlets: *A Few Thoughts on the Foreign Policy of the United States* (Charleston, 1849); ² *Oration delivered before the Beaufort Volunteer Artillery on July 4, 1850* (Charleston, 1850); ² *The Position and Course of the South* (Charleston, 1850); ² *A Letter to Honorable A. P. Butler, U. S. Senate, on the Diplomatic System of the United States* (Charleston, 1853); ³ *An American View of the Eastern Question* (Charleston, 1854); ³ *Oration delivered before the South Carolina Historical Society* (printed in the *Collections of the South Carolina Historical Society*, 1889, vol. III.); *The Late General Stephen Elliott: Eulogy delivered in the House of Representatives of South Carolina, Friday, September 7, 1866* (London, 1867); ² *Three Letters for James L. Orr, Governor of South Carolina, to the President of the United States and the Secretary of the Treasury in reference to the Sea Islands* (Washington, Gibson Brothers, 1868); *Memorial of the Life of J. Johnston Pettigrew, Brigadier General, C. S. A.* (Charleston, 1870); ² *Letter Reviewing the Bayard-Chamberlain Fishery Treaty* (Washington, 1888); ³ *Oration before the Alumni of the College of Charleston* (Charleston, 1889).

GAILLARD HUNT.

[Although that version of his narrative which Mr. Trescot wrote in February, 1861, is for obvious reasons preferred, as more nearly contemporaneous, to that which he prepared in 1870, certain portions of the latter which are not represented by parallel passages in the former, and not printed in General Crawford's book, have been inserted below in square brackets. For the contribution which follows, we are indebted to Edward A. Trescot, Esq., the writer's son. ED.]

² A copy is in the Library of Congress.

³ A copy is in the Department of State.

[*Introduction to the second version, dated August, 1870:*—These pages make no pretension to be either literature or history. They are simply a record of the impression made upon me by events which have been the subject of much controversy and the truth about which is of essential importance to the future history of the Country.

I do not even claim that my impressions are correct. All I can claim is that they are the honest impressions made by facts truthfully stated. There may be other facts, unknown to me, equally true, and very different impressions may have been made by them on men equally honest.

But it is only by a rigid and impartial scrutiny of all the testimony that the future historian can reach the positive truth. This is only a contribution to the materials of that future history.

These pages were written in February 1861, immediately upon my return from Washington, now nearly ten years ago.]

About the beginning of June 1860, I reached Washington and was confirmed by the Senate as Assistant Secretary of State in the place of the Hon John Appleton appointed Minister Plenipotentiary to Russia. I did not know then and have not learned since to what influence the appointment was due. It was made without consultation with my friends and without previous intimation to me. At the time I was entirely withdrawn from public life and indeed with the exception of a very short Diplomatic service as Secretary of Legation at London while the Hon J. R. Ingersoll was Minister and Mr Everett, Sec of State, I had never been in public life at all, had never taken any active part in public affairs either in the State or in the Union. Gen Cass, who was Secretary of State was pleased to say that the appointment was made entirely for its fitness evidenced by certain publications upon the subject of our Diplomatic History to which it is unnecessary further to refer. Upon my arrival in Washington I saw Mr Buchanan and Gen Cass for the first time and with the exception of the Senators and some of the Members from South Carolina I had no personal acquaintance with any of the public characters of the day. I ought perhaps to except Mr Slidell the Senator from Louisiana whom I knew slightly.

Soon after my arrival Congress adjourned and just before the adjournment Gen Cass left on leave of absence to spend his summer at Detroit and I was appointed by the President's warrant and in conformity with the Act of 1797 Acting Secretary of State.

Placed thus at the head of the State Department my relations with the President, the Cabinet and the Foreign Ministers were naturally and necessarily freer and more intimate than they would have been under ordinary circumstances, with the President especially as he took a special interest in that Department and watched its proceedings minutely and carefully. His Diplomatic experience was large and his views very cautious as well as very clear. I shall allways consider my official intercourse with him a great advantage and whatever may have happened since shall always remember with kindness his uniform courtesy and

confidence and the many pleasant incidents of that summers association. Of him and his cabinet I shall record my impressions hereafter. At present my object is simply to preserve while they are fresh in my memory a narrative of the events connected with the visit of the Commissioners from South Carolina.

By the time the autumn arrived a common interest in the political questions of the day and frequent association had brought me into rather intimate relations with the Southern Members of the Cabinet, Cobb, Floyd and Thomson. At length the decisive day came and Lincolns election presented a practical issue to the South. The attitude of South Carolina gave additional importance to my position for I was the only South Carolinian connected with the administration with anything like official rank and the only one who held anything like confidential relations with the leaders of public opinion in the State and as Congress was not in session it was very natural that upon the question of the relations of the Government to the State I should be very freely consulted.

It is unnecessary now to go through the various conversations especially with Mr Cobb and Gov: Floyd which accompanied the progress of events. It is sufficient to say that from the election of Lincoln and indeed from the time that his election was probable, Mr Cobb expressed but one opinion, that it was the duty of the South in defence both of honour and interest to dissolve the Union. He thought that every State should secede by itself and that secession should be practically accomplished on the 4th of March upon the close of Mr Buchanans administration. This he thought most likely to unite the South and only due to Mr Buchanans consistent support of Southern rights.

Gov: Floyd thought secession unwise and dissolution unnecessary. He believed the Black republican triumph only temporary and that their success would be their destruction. As a matter of policy therefore he wished to fight in the Union but recognised the right of a State to secede if she thought it necessary and fully sympathised with the South in the opinion that as far as the North was concerned enough had been done to justify any action the South might take.

Mr Thomsons general views I never did understand clearly. As far as I could learn, he would go with the South but did not seem to think that the South would act or would be forced to act.

The President and Gov: Toucey the Sec of the Navy seemed to me to agree most perfectly. They thought with Gov Floyd that the republican victory was only illusory—that the party could not survive success and that great and universal re-action had commenced at the North. They did not believe that the South was in earnest and thought that secession was probable only in the case of S. C. but they neither recognised the right of a State to secede.

Gen Cass stood I think by himself. From the beginning he believed Lincolns election certain and the dissolution of the Union inevitable.

Not recognising any right in a State to secede except as a revolutionary right, he would have resisted the right at the commencement and as the sworn officer of the U. S. have done his utmost to preserve its integrity. That he believed to be his duty and he would have done it altho he believed he would not succeed in his attempt for a long and bloody civil war, he has over and over again said to me, was the sure and necessary result of the existing condition of things.

Judge Black, the Atty Gen, agreed more nearly with Gen Cass than with anybody else but the Judge never at least before I left Washington seemed to get beyond the legal bearings of the question. It was not with him a question of State but a legal question submitted to the Atty Gen for his opinion.

Of Mr Holt's opinion I had no personal knowledge—what it was has been made very evident of late.

The first time that I was called on to do more than exchange opinions was just after the Legislature of the State had determined to call the Convention but before the election of Members of that body. Just as I was sitting down to dinner one day I received a telegraph from Charleston saying that intense excitement prevailed in the city on account of the removal by Col. Gardner then in command at Fort Moultrie of some arms or ammunition from the U. S. Arsenal in the City, that if the removal was by orders from the Dep of War, it ought to be revoked, otherwise collision was inevitable. Knowing that the Cabinet were then in session I went over immediately to the White House and met the members as the Council broke up, coming down. I called Gov: Floyd aside and he was joined I think by Cobb and Toucey to whom I shewed the Despatch. Gov: Floyd replied "Telegraph back at once, say you have seen me, that no such orders have been issued and none such will be issued under any circumstances". This I did immediately. When a day or two after I received letters giving me a more detailed account of the whole transaction I again saw Gov Floyd who communicated to me in a very full conversation the information he had received and his impressions and his final determination to remove Col. Gardiner and supply his place with Major Robert Anderson in whose discretion coolness and judgment he put great confidence.⁴ He also determined to send Col. Ben Huger to take charge of the Arsenal, believing that his high reputation, and his close association with many of the most influential people in Charleston and the fact of his being a Carolinian would satisfy the people of the intentions of the Government. He said that with his opinions he never could and never would consent to the coercion of a Sovereign State—that while he did not think the action of S. C. wise, he sympathised deeply with her spirit—that considering the re-inforcement of the garrisons in Charleston Harbour as looking very like coercion and at any rate only calculated to excite and irritate the popular feeling he would not consent to it. But that he would not submit to

⁴ See *Official Records of the War*, I. 69-73.

any attempt on the part of the people to take the forts—that he was bound to resist and would resist. What would be the consequence of the secession of the State was a grave question which had not yet arisen but that at present he was resolved upon two things—not to reinforce the forts and not to allow them to be taken by an unlawful force. In these positions I agreed with him and both he and I agreed further in believing that there was no danger of an attack on the forts by an unlawful mob and that the State would take action she might deem necessary regularly and with due notice to the Government at Washington. The position of Gov Floyd I explained fully by letters to those at home who could in my opinion best use the knowledge for the purpose of quieting the alarm and apprehension of the citizens of Charleston.

The apprehension of the people of Charleston however was not easily quieted and Gen Cass and Judge Black were anxious to send reinforcements to the Forts. The subject was one of constant discussion. Gov: Floyd was earnest in his determination and resolved not to re-inforce but he thought that when such were his opinions he ought to be trusted, that if in the ordinary routine of the business of his Dep, he sent a few men to Fort Sumt[e]r or a few boxes of ammunition to Fort Moultrie, they ought not to be objects of suspicion. They would never be used and he argued with great force—"You tell me that if any attempt is made to do what under ordinary circumstances is done every day, you will be unable to restrain your people—suppose you are not able to restrain them now, am I bound to leave those garrisons unprotected to the mercy of a mob—am I not bound to enable *them* to resist the unlawful violence which *you* cannot resist?"

While I felt the force of this reasoning I knew also that in the then condition of feeling in Charleston, anything that could be even misunderstood or misrepresented as reinforcement would lead to an explosion which would injure the whole Southern cause. I therefore saw Gov Cobb, explained to him what I understood to be Gov Floyds position. I told him that while I admitted its strength things were in that condition that he could not act from it—that I had the most perfect confidence in him and had pledged myself that our people could trust him perfectly but that any nice difference between what was re-inforcement for the purpose of re-inforcement and what was only ordinary routine would not be understood at such a time—and that unless the Sec of War could make up his mind to allow no change in the Forts important or not, I could not answer for the consequences and after what I had written home would feel bound to resign and tell the authorities there to judge for themselves. I believed such a step would lead to the occupation of Fort Sumter in forty eight hours. And I told him that I was on my way to Gov Floyd to announce to him my conclusion. He proposed that I should postpone my visit until after a conference which he was to have that morning with Gov Floyd and Mr Thomson. I did so. That night Gov Floyd called at my house and had a long and very free

conversation in which he expressed his former convictions, his feeling that the South ought to accept his action without suspicion as his opinions were well known and fixed and had been acted on consistently long before this crisis had come, but that if I thought that collision between the people of the State and the Government forces would be precipitated he would not consent that a man nor a gun should be sent to any of the Forts in the harbour of Charleston and if his sense of duty induced any change in his determination, I would be informed by him in advance of any action and in ample time to pursue such a course as I deemed proper. Things continued upon this footing while the cabinet was engaged in the discussion of the President's annual message, but those members of the Cabinet who desired that re-inforcements should be sent pressed their policy and a few evenings after the last conversation with Gov Floyd, he called upon me evidently much excited. He said that just after dinner the President had sent for him, that when he reached him (at his room in the State Dep: which he occupied while preparing his message) he found Gen Cass and Judge Black there who retired immediately upon his entrance. The President then informed him that he had determined to re-inforce the garrisons in Charleston harbour upon which a very animated discussion arose which had finally ended by the Presidents suspending his decision until Gen Scott reached Washington and the Gen. had been immediately telegraphed to come on to Washington. Gov: Floyd thought that he could satisfy Scott of the impolicy of such a step. He asked me to accompany him to Mr Cobb. Mr Cobb had been quite sick for a day or two and when we reached his house we found that the Dr had given orders that he should not be disturbed. We then started for Mr Thomson's but met him a very few steps off on his way to Mr Cobbs and we all returned to Gov: Floyds where we had a very long discussion of the whole question. Gov: Floyd declared that his mind was made up, that he would cut off his right hand before he would sign an order to send re-inforcements to the Carolina forts and if the President insisted he would resign. Mr Thomson said he agreed with him perfectly and would sustain his course and follow him.

The practical question was by what means the President could be induced to change his purpose. I suggested three.

1. I was not a Cabinet Minister but as Acting Sec of State during a great part of the summer had been in confidential relations with the President. I was the only S. C. in Washington who occupied any position that brought me into official relation with the President directly—he had conversed with me more than once on this subject with freedom and my relations to the public men at home enabled me to speak authoritatively of and to them. I proposed that I should go to the President, state to him that the Sec of War had communicated to me his intentions, disabuse his mind of any unfounded apprehensions as to the action of the State and submit to him the reasons against such a policy as he

thought of adopting. Should I make no impression I would then say that under the circumstances it was my duty however painful to submit my resignation then and there and leave for Columbia the next morning to submit all the facts to the Executive of S. C. I would be in Columbia in 36 hours and upon such information there could be no earthly doubt that the Forts would be occupied in the following 24. Such a resolution respectfully but firmly stated would I thought make the President hesitate. Indeed he could not have acted for he would have been forced to remove Gov: Floyd and the time occupied in the changes and in the execution of the orders would be more than enough to give the State the necessary opportunity. This for reasons unnecessary now to state but which were conclusive, was rejected.

2. To telegraph Mr Miles the M.C. from Charleston to come on immediately in hopes that his representation of the public feeling in Charleston very much exaggerated by the telegraph and letter writers, would relieve the President. This was also rejected.

3. The third which was adopted was that I should write to the Governor of the State (Gist) tell him that the President was under very strong apprehensions that the people would sieze the Forts—that in consequence he felt bound to send re-inforcements. That the Southern Members of the Cabinet would resist this policy to resignation but that they thought that if he felt authorized to write a letter assuring the President that if no reinforcements were sent, there would be no attempt upon the Forts before the meeting of the Convention and that then Commissioners would be sent to negotiate all the points of difference, that their hands would be strengthened, the responsibility of provoking collision would be taken from the State and the President would probably be relieved from the necessity of pursuing this policy. They added that if such a letter was written and failed he should have information in ample time to take such steps as the interest of the State required.

I wrote such a letter and in a few days received the following answer—(see Letter)⁵ which I communicated to Govs Floyd Cobb and Mr Thomson.

While these consultations and conversations were occurring, the President had prepared his Message and in view of its tenor and the probable action of my State, I deemed it proper to say to the President that I had informed Gen Cass I felt it my duty to resign and I would be glad if he would make his selection for my successor as it would probably not be convenient to him for me to leave the office without any one in charge. My interview with the President was a very kind one and at that time Mr Ledyard it was understood would be appointed. He was the son-in-law of Gen Cass, had been his Sec. Legation in France and was in every way very well qualified for the Post. I heard

⁵ Trescot's letter of November 26, 1860, and Governor Gist's reply of November 29, and other letter of the same date, will be found in Crawford, *Genesis of the Civil War*, pp. 30-32.

afterwards that great objection was entertained in some quarters against his appointment on account of his supposed preference for Mr Douglass or a sympathy with the Black republicans. Of this I know nothing. My intercourse with him was always pleasant. We differed widely but respected each others differences and never discussed party politics. A day or two after the receipt of Gov. Gist's letter on the Saturday preceeding the Monday on which Congress assembled, Gov Cobb informed me that the President was desirous that I should take a special copy of his message in advance of its publication to Gov: Gist. That I had been conversant with the discussions relating to it, understood the Presidents views and could while in Columbia explain what was misunderstood there and bring back correct and authoritative account of the state of opinion in S. C. and thus serve to prepare the way for a temperate solution of the issues which must soon arise. The secession of the State was considered certain but it was desirable that an issue of force or a rude collision should if possible be avoided. I saw the President immediately and expressed my willingness to go if he deemed it advisable and he then requested me to withhold my resignation until my return and appointed the hour of nine the next night to give me such instructions as he thought necessary.

On Sunday night⁶ about nine o'clock the President sent for me. While the President was preparing his Annual Message for Congress it was his custom to spend the morning in a room at the State Dep. specially set apart for him and on several occasions he had sent for me in reference to Treaties and other papers relating to the Foreign Affairs of the year. On several of these occasions the conversation had turned upon the present condition of public affairs. As events developed the President became very anxious and would always enquire for the news from Carolina. He had come to the conclusion that the State would secede and the two issues that seemed most to render him uneasy were the collection of the revenues and the seizure of the Forts. I assured him that I did not think he had much to apprehend in the way of unlawful force, that the people of So. Ca. not only held the right of Secession but that they took special pride in carrying out that right quietly, regularly, peaceably as a *right* not as a revolutionary measure—that I really believed it would mortify them to be compelled to resort to force. That they would pass the Ordonnance of Secession and then send regularly accredited agents to negotiate with the governments. "But" said he "you know I cannot recognize them, all I can do is to refer them to Congress". I told him that I believed such a reference courteously made and in good faith would be accepted and that the State would wait a reasonable time for the decision of Congress—this he seemed to think would be sufficient if the Secession was inevitable but still he was very cautious and his great hope seemed to be by temporizing to avoid an issue before the 4th March.

⁶ December 2.

On Sunday night when I saw him, he went over the old ground, said that he thought his message ought to be acceptable to the South that he had spoken the truth boldly and clearly and that all that he had declared was that with regard to the laws of the U. S and the property he would discharge the obligations of his official oath.

I told him that I would take the message with pleasure because it was a courtesy to the Executive of the State and because I thought that waiving the opinions as to the right of Secession it was as conciliatory as it was possible for him to make it from his position and indeed more so than I had expected. But that I must say in candour that it would have no effect upon the action of the Convention, that my recent letters satisfied me that the State would not only secede but that it would secede immediately—that delay until the 4th March was impossible but that having said that much I was perfectly willing to take the message as he desired and I felt confident that he might rely upon my assurance that there would be no violence used towards the Forts by any unlawful assemblage or mob, and that I had in my pocket a letter from the Governor of the State which I would read to him if he desired and the tenour of which I then communicated to him. He then asked me if I had seen Gen Cass. I said not that day but that I had talked over the whole subject with him again and again and we always ended where we began. He said however that I must see him when I left the White House—he wished it particularly and say to him all that I had just said to him. I went to the Generals and did repeat my conversation with the President and left Washington for Columbia on Monday morning.⁷

[Governor Gist received the message in the spirit in which it was sent but he said at once, what indeed was evident from even two or three days association with the members of the Legislature, that the State was determined on immediate secession, that no scheme of policy however plausible could induce delay until the 4th March either in deference to Mr Buchanans position or with a view to the co-operation of other states. At the same time it was evident that the leaders of public opinion did not desire an issue of force and would proceed temperately but resolutely in their work. It was also clear that to avoid such an issue, the Federal Government, however it temporized, would have to concede the principle upon which the State stood. There was also a strong resolution to prevent if possible any popular demonstration of force either in violation of the laws or in the seizure of the property of the United States.]

I reached Washington on Sunday⁸ on my return and saw the President for a few moments that evening and made an appointment for Monday.

On Monday when I called, the Carolina Delegation were with him,

⁷ December 3.

⁸ December 9.

I did not interrupt them but when they had gone I saw him. He shewed me a paper signed by all of them I think but Col Ashmore—the paper which has been published in the correspondence between the President and the Commissioners.⁹ He appeared to be much gratified by it and much relieved and said that he had asked them to see me and he would then have a talk with me. I told him that I had not seen them but that paper did not go any farther if as far as the Governors letter which I had communicated to him. “What letter” said he “I do not recollect it and when?” “The evening on which you gave me your message to take to Columbia.” He said he did not remember it, “have you got it?” I said it was at my house and I could get it in five minutes and added that as the Sec of the Interior had just come in I would leave them to their business while I went for it. I brought it back and read it to the President in Mr Thomson’s presence. We then discussed it and the whole subject and I told the President that my impression from my visit confirmed exactly what I had said to him before I went. “Well”, said he, “that is all very well up to the point where the negotiation stops—for Congress may refuse to entertain it—what then?” “Then Sir”, said I, “I will speak with the most perfect candour, then the State will take the Forts—what else can she do if she is in earnest? But I hope the negotiation will not fail. And”, I added, “Mr President, why keep troops in the Forts at all?—If I understand your message rightly you consider them simply as property just as you do the Post Office and the Sub Treasury building—You dont propose to guard them do you?” He said “No”. “Then”, said I, “why not treat the Forts precisely in the same manner—keep an orderly sergeant and one or two men there only?” He said he had great faith in the honour of the State and that the Governors letter and the Memorandum of the M.C.’s was a guarantee he believed that nothing violent would be done. That he would receive the Commissioners kindly and refer the whole matter to Congress and so on travelling round in the same circle—and I took my leave.

Soon after my return to Washington I received late one night a telegraph from Charleston informing me that some muskets had been removed from the Arsenal in Charleston by Captn Foster U. S. A. I took the telegraph over to Gov: Floyd who was confined to his bed and was requested by him to see Col Drinkard the C.C. of the Dep and tell him to issue an order by telegraph for their immediate restoration. The order was sent and by the telegraph which was kept open all night, was acknowledged. The next morning the arms were restored.¹⁰

⁹ 36 Cong., 2 sess., *House Ex. Doc.*, no. 26, vol. VI., p. 9; *Official Records of the War*, I. 116; Curtis, *Buchanan*, II. 377. Statement of Miles and Keitt to the South Carolina Convention, *Official Records*, I. 125-128.

¹⁰ *Official Records*, I. 95-100. Two telegrams to Mr. Trescott upon the subject, taken from the second version of his narrative, are given in Crawford, *Genesis*, pp. 77, 78.

In the meantime Gen Cass who had from the beginning of the controversy held but one opinion and one language, submitted to the President his formal advice that re-inforcements should be sent to the Forts at Charleston. The morning on which he submitted his opinion I went into his room to hand him my resignation which I had withdrawn until my return from Columbia. He begged me to keep it for a day or two for events might render it unnecessary, at least he perhaps could not act on it—he said he could not speak more plainly then but the next day he would explain all altho I probably understood him. This of course I knew meant only one thing and the next day he resigned, the President having refused to accept his advice. Under the circumstances I felt bound to say to the President that I would continue in office until he appointed a New Secretary provided the appointment was made before the Act of Secession was passed by the Convention. For the refusal to adopt Gen Cass' advice was in the interest of the State and it would have embarrassed the President to have the Dep without either a Secretary or an Asst Sec. Judge Black, the Atty Gen who was appointed was very busy in the Supreme Court and it was not I think before the 17th the day of the passage of the Act that I fairly ceased official action at the Dep.

The Legislature of S. C. had elected by this time the new Governor Pickens. I wrote to him informing him that his predecessor Gov: Gist had desired me to remain in Washington after my resignation in order that there might be some authorized channel of communication until the arrival of Commissioners from the Convention and I described to the Gov: the then condition of things. This invitation of Gov: Gist I had communicated to the Pres and such members of the Cabinet as I consulted or even spoke to freely on public affairs. (See letter.)¹¹

Soon after Gov P's election the Convention met and passed the Ordinance of Secession, but before the Ordinance passed, D. H. Hamilton arrived from Gov: P. with a letter for me¹² covering a sealed letter to

¹¹ The letter, Trescot to Pickens, December 14, 1860, follows on a later page.

¹² This letter, dated Columbia, December 17, and marked "Strictly confidential", is here transcribed from the copy in the second version of Mr. Trescot's narrative:

"My Dear Sir:—I send Daniel H. Hamilton, the bearer of a very important confidential letter to the President of the United States and would be deeply obliged to you, as you are now in Washington under request of Gov: Gist, to attend to him immediately and go with him to see that he most certainly is able to deliver himself the letter to the President of the U. S.

"You will take occasion to say to the President that Mr Hamilton will remain one day if it is desired he shall wait that long, to receive any letter or communication that may be made and that you will deliver it yourself—and if you think it necessary you may yourself bring the answer if the President accompanies it by any verbal explanation that may be trusted to you from the President.

"And by the end of one day you will communicate with Mr Hamilton and inform him whether he will bring the answer or whether you will bring it yourself."

the President which I was directed to see delivered by Hamilton. Its contents were not communicated but I was informed that Hamilton was to wait 24 hours for an answer, but that if the President preferred sending an answer by me accompanied by a verbal communication, I was instructed to bring it. The nature of this extraordinary missive I had received notice of in a confidential letter by the previous mail *not* from the Gov: however. I saw the President and returned with Hamilton at an hour appointed. The President received us in the Library, read the letter and asked Hamilton when he expected to return. He replied the next morning. The P. said it was impossible to give him the answer by that time—could he not wait longer? Hamilton said Yes, until the next evening. The P. said the answer would then be ready. Hamilton then said, "Mr President I am aware of the contents of that letter and think that if you would accept them it would greatly facilitate the negotiations between my government and the U. S." The President said he would consider it and give Mr Hamilton his answer the next day. The President as I was leaving the room called me back, gave me the letter, asked me to read it and return to him, to talk it over.¹³

The letter proposed that in order to quiet the apprehensions of the people of the State as to the Forts, Gov P. should be authorized by the President to occupy Fort Sumter with a small body of State troops, the answer to the request or demand to be given in 24 hours.

The objections to this demand it is useless to state, but if Gov P had simply asked the President for an assurance that Sumter should not be occupied and that Anderson should be so instructed I think it could have been obtained. As it was, this demand if persisted in released the President from his pledge to the Members of C and placed them in a very awkward attitude and in my opinion would lead to exactly what it wanted to avoid. I consulted Senators Davis and Slidell and we were very much embarrassed what to do. Gen Bonham and McQueen dined with me that day and as Hamilton had told them of the object of his mission I communicated to them the contents of his letter and told them that if they would join me I would telegraph the Gov for authority to withdraw it. We did so, I received the authority and the next morning withdrew the letter.¹⁴ The President expressed his gratification, repeated to me over and again his desire to avoid a collision, his readiness to receive Commissioners, to refer them to Congress in good faith and his determination not to disturb the Status of the Forts but to wait the result of their negotiation. He was pledged, he said, not to disturb the Status in the favour of the U. S. and the Gov ought not and could not justly ask him to disturb it in favour of the State. He was trusting to

¹³ This letter of Pickens, December 17, 1860, the day of his inauguration as governor, and three days before the secession of the state, was printed in the *Journal of the House of Representatives of South Carolina*, regular session of November, 1861, p. 67, and reprinted in Nicolay and Hay, *Lincoln*, III. 2.

¹⁴ See Buchanan's memorandum in Curtis, II. 383.

the honour of Carolina and they ought not to suspect him, he was acting under the obligations of his honour and I and the State might rely upon it, would redeem it to the uttermost. He said he had taken no copy of the letter but would be glad if I had no objections to have a copy of the telegraph under which I withdrew it which I gave him. I accordingly returned the letter to Hamilton with a letter to the Governor stating my reasons for desiring to withdraw it. (See letter.)¹⁵

[On the 23^d I received the following telegram

W H Trescott

CHARLESTON DECEMBER 23, 60

I have been informed that thirteen men have arrived by the North Eastern rail road and they say they were sent to Fort Moultrie and are a part of one hundred and fifty (150). I desire to know immediately if it is intended to reinforce the forts or to transfer any force from Fort Moultrie to Fort Sumter. I want a clear answer on this immediately. Until the Commissioners shall negotiate at Washington, there can be no change here.

F. W. PICKENS.

Again I called upon Gov: Floyd. The Gov was evidently becoming impatient under the embarrassments of his position for it was difficult to be accountable to the President on the one hand and to the State of S. C. on the other. He had done every thing that a man in his situation could do to prove his good faith and he felt very naturally that the difficulties of his position ought to be appreciated and that explanations and pledges perhaps inconsistent with his duties should not be pressed except under the very gravest necessity. It was moreover a matter of great moment that in this juncture Gov Floyd should retain his place in the Cabinet as long as possible and every step he took or did not take was watched and misrepresented for no man at the South was more cordially detested by the Black Republican Party. Gov Floyd told me to reply to the Governor that there was not the slightest foundation for any alarm, that he knew nothing of any such men and any statement to such an effect was a sheer fabrication, made he must suppose, for purposes of mischief. As for the removal of troops to Sumter, he could not see any likelihood of it, that he did not think it necessary to send special orders to that end to Maj Anderson for he could not consider it at all probable and that in fact he thought any such contingency provided against by orders already sent to which he did not feel at liberty to refer more specially; that the Commissioners must soon be in Washington and that he could see no rational ground for anticipating premature difficulty. I thought this as far really as he could go and that to press upon him or the President more positive action was to risk the advantage that continued delay on the part of the Government was giving to the State. I therefore telegraphed the Governor the contradiction he authorized and waited with anxiety the arrival of the Commissioners.]

¹⁵ This letter, Trescott to Pickens, December 21, 1860, was printed in the *Journal of the House of Representatives of South Carolina*, regular session of November, 1861, pp. 169-171, and reprinted in Nicolay and Hay, III. 7-9.

Within a very few days I received from the Governor a formal despatch by telegraph stating the appointment by the Convention of Commissioners and instructing me to communicate their appointment and the time of their departure to the President which I did. He asked the character of the appointments, expressed himself pleased with the selection, disclosed his readiness to see them and to refer them courteously to Congress and his intention to act in perfect good faith.

The Commissioners telegraphed me to remain in Washington until they came. I made the necessary arrangements for them, received them and called the evening of their arrival¹⁰ on the President to inform him of their presence in Washington. Judge Black was with him. We talked over a good deal that we had gone over before and the President appointed an hour—one, I think, the next day—to receive them. I told him they would submit their credentials to him and have an informal conversation with him but that if he submitted the matter of their reception to Congress they would wish to send a communication to go in with his message—they would come prepared with it, or if he agreed with me in thinking it best, they would not prepare it until after the conversation when perhaps all parties would understand each other better but it was to be considered as submitted on the conversation, to which he cheerfully assented.

The Commissioners upon their arrival invited me to act as their Secretary which I declined for reasons which it is unnecessary to mention and they then insisted upon my remaining with them in Washington and acting with them unofficially which I did altho with great reluctance.

The day after their arrival was spent in preparing their credentials for delivery to the President. The next morning I was at their residence and while talking over the condition of affairs Col Wigfall one of the Texas Senators came in to inform us that the telegraph had just brought the news that Major Anderson had left Fort Moultrie, spiked his guns, burned his gun carriages, cut down the flag staff and removed his command to Sumter. We all expressed our disbelief in the intelligence and after a good deal of discussion I said, "Well at any rate Col., True or not I will pledge my life that if it has been done it has been without orders from Washington". Just as I made the remark Gov: Floyd, the Sec at War was announced. After the usual courtesies of a meeting I said, "Gov., Col Wigfall has just brought us this news and as you were coming up the stairs I said I would pledge my life it was without orders". "You can do more" said he smiling "You can pledge your life Mr Trescot that it is not so. It is impossible. It would be not only against orders but in the face of orders. To be very frank Anderson was instructed in case he had to abandon his position, to dismantle Fort Sumter not Fort Moultrie". I asked him if his carriage was at the door to let me take it and go home—there might be telegraphs there.

¹⁰ Wednesday, December 26. The commissioners, it will be remembered, were Robert W. Barnwell, James H. Adams and James L. Orr.

I took the carriage, drove home and returned immediately with two telegrams for Col Barnwell which he read and handed them to Gov Floyd saying "I am afraid Gov: it is too true". Floyd read the telegram (from Gen Jones) asked the Commissioners whether they considered the authority sufficient and then rose adding "I must go to the Dep: at once". He immediately went to the War Dep. I went up to the Senate, communicated the news to Senator Davis of Miss and Senator Hunter and asked them if they would go with me to the President. We drove down to the White House and sent in our names, were asked into the Presidents room where he joined us in a few moments. When he came in he was evidently nervous. I knew his manner too well to be mistaken and he immediately commenced by making some remark to Mr Hunter about the removal of Beverly Tucker the Consul at Liverpool to which Mr Hunter made a general reply. Col Davis then said "Mr President we have called upon an infinitely greater matter than any consulate". "What is it", asked the P. "Have you received any intel[1]igence from Charleston in the last two or three hours", said Col D. "None", said the P. "Then", said Col D. "I have a great calamity to announce to you". He then stated the facts and added "and now Mr President you are surrounded with blood and dishonour on all sides". The President was standing by the mantelpiece crushing up a cigar into pieces in his hand—a habit I have seen him practice often. He sat down as Col D finished and exclaimed—"My God are calamities (or misfortunes, I forget which). never to come singly. I call God to witness—you gentlemen better than anybody know—that this is not only without but against my orders, it is against my policy." He then expressed his doubt of the truth of the telegram, thought it strange that nothing had been heard at the War Dep—said he had not seen Gov: Floyd and finally sent a messenger for him. When Gov Floyd came he said that no telegram had come to the Dep: that the heads of Bureaux there thought it unlikely but that he had telegraphed to this effect himself—"There is a report here that you have abandoned Fort Moultrie, spiked your guns, burned your carriages and gone to Fort Sumter. It is not believed as you had no orders to justify it. Say at one [once] what could have given rise to such a story".¹⁷

The President was urged to take immediate action—he was told that the probability was that the remaining Forts would be seized and garrisoned by S. C and that Fort Sumter would be attacked—that if he would only say that he would replace matters as he had pledged himself that they should remain, there was yet time to remedy the mischief. The discussion was long and earnest. At first he seemed disposed to declare that he would restore the Status but then hesitated, said he must call his cabinet together, he could not condemn Maj Anderson unheard. He was told that nobody asked that, only say that *if* the

¹⁷ The texts of the telegram and of Anderson's replies are in *Official Records*, I. 3.

move had been made without a previous attack on Anderson he would restore the status. Assure us of that determination and then take what time was necessary for consultation and information. That resolution telegraphed would restore confidence and enable the Commissioners to continue their negotiation. This he declined doing and we left. On our way out we met Gen Lane, Senator Bigler, Yulee, Mallory on their way to make the same remonstrance for the news was over the City. Later in the day I saw him to shew him some more detailed telegraphs. Senator Slidell was with him but all that he did was to authorize me to telegraph that Andersons movement was not only without but against his orders.

The interview with the Commissioners was postponed until the next day when they presented him their credentials and the first letter of their correspondence (See Correspondence).¹⁸ I was not present at that interview.

The following days were consumed in Cabinet meetings duri[n]g which Gov: Floyd resigned for the reasons stated in his published letter.¹⁹ The answer to the Commissioners was in the mean while sent. Upon Floyds resignation Holt was appointed Sec at War. On Sunday I determined to see the President once more. I found him with Mr Toucey the Sec of the Navy. I told him I would like with his permission to have a half hours conversation with him to which he very courteously assented. I then as temperately as I could reviewed the whole transaction—he stopped me at first saying that I of all persons ought to know it was exceedingly irregular and improper for the President to discuss such matters with the Sec of the Commission. I told him I was not Sec nor had any sort of official connection with the Comm: that I came to him simply because he himself had established my connection with this affair and in such a way that I had a right I thought to speak freely to him. He then said—in that case proceed. I could not now repeat the conversation, it was very earnest but very temperate. He shewed a good deal of feeling and seemed very much worn and distressed. I inferred from all that passed that his difficulty consisted in this—that the seizure of the other Forts by S. C. rendered the restoration of the former status impossible for if he ordered Anderson from Sumter he had nowhere to send him unless he withdrew him altogether from the harbour. Under this impression I went to Mr Hunter of Virginia and told him if this is the difficulty tell the President that if he will withdraw from Sumter, the State will withdraw from the other Forts and that Maj Anderson will be as safe in Fort Moultrie as if he were here. The Comm: will accept this return to the status and guarantee his safety. Mr Hunter immediately went to

¹⁸ 36 Cong., 2 sess., *House Ex. Doc.* no. 26, vol. VI., pp. 5-12. Buchanan's account of the interview of December 28 is in *Mr. Buchanan's Administration*, pp. 181, 182; an account by one of the commissioners is in Crawford, *Genesis of the Civil War*, p. 148.

¹⁹ Printed in Moore's *Rebellion Record*, I., Documents, p. 10.

him and when he returned—I was waiting at his rooms—he said: “Tell the Comm: it is hopeless. The President has taken his ground—I *cant* repeat what passed between us but if you can get a telegram to Charleston, telegraph at once to your people to sink vessels in the channel of the harbour.” This message he sent the next morni[n]g again to the Comm by his colleague Mr Mason. There is no doubt that orders for reinforcements had then been issued altho afterwards countermanded. After this there was no further hope, the Commissioners replied as appears by their correspondence²⁰ and left Washington.

The above is merely a rough outline to be made complete at my leisure and the letters and telegrams to be inserted. One or two facts and some conversations are omitted and I intend to add my views of the facts as they occur.

WM HENRY TRESCOTT

Feby 1861

In the whole of these transactions Mr Buchanans position was a very difficult one and it was aggravated by three things. 1. Mr Buchanan never not even I think at the last moment realized the danger. The representations made to him of the condition of feeling and opinion of the South he never would believe. He thought it likely that South Carolina would secede but that she would not be supported by any other state and not even Mr Cobbs resignation opened his eyes altho he had great respect for Mr Cobbs judgment and must have seen that this resignation was the utter destruction of Mr Cobbs future if he had misinterpreted Georgia. The first time he seemed really to begin to believe in what was so near at hand was when Mr Toombs called on him. While the Commissioners from S. C. were waiting in Washington, several gentlemen of influence in Savannah Georgia, telegraphed both Mr Toombs and Mr Orr to know whether Fort Sumter would be restored to its status by the withdrawal of Anderson and whether it would be held by the Government. The object of the enquiry was clear and it was thought not impolitic to give the President information of the consequence of his persistence. Mr Toombs accordingly went to the White House and sent in his card. The Cabinet was in session but the President received him in the next room. “I am aware Mr President” said T “that the Cabinet is in session and that today is the annual dinner to the Supreme Court and that you have scarcely time to see me. But while I apologize for the intrusion, it is an evidence what importance I attach to the interview. I would ask Mr President whether you have decided upon your course as to Fort Sumter?” “No Sir, I have not yet decided. The Cabinet is now in session upon that very subject.” “I thank you Sir for the information that is all I wanted to know”, said T. retiring. “But Mr T. why do you ask?”

²⁰ *Official Records*, I. 120-125.

"Because Sir my State has a deep interest in the decision." "How your State—what is it to Georgia whether a fort in Charleston harbour is abandoned?" "Sir, the cause of Charleston is the cause of the South". "Good God Mr Toombs do you mean that I am in the midst of a revolution?" "Yes Sir—more than that—you have been there for a year and have not yet found it out"—and he retired. When the President returned to the Cabinet he seemed very much excited and said, "Gentlemen I really begin to believe that this is revolution". But Mr Buchanan ought to have known the truth better and sooner. He was not ignorant of the consequences of such a move as one state at least even in his opinion was sure to make. I was much impressed with a remark of his on that very subject. I was spending one night with him during the summer at his residence—the Soldiers Home—and after tea Gov: Floyd joined us in the porch and the conversation became very interesting. Turning at last upon the probable result of the coming Presidential election and its consequences, he said "well there is no danger as long as the States wait upon each other—as long as they wait for joint resolutions to act, but if any one state is bold enough to act—to secede by itself, then questions will be raised beyond the solution of any statesman in this country"—or words to that effect.

But when the fact happened, he could not believe it. Accustomed like all Northern statesmen to look at the Union rather than the States, habituated to use state politics merely as counters in the game for Federal power and belonging to a party which had never hesitated to make "a cry" of the most solemn and important issues, he could not realize that this popular excitement was any thing wider or deeper than the thousand and one political agitations on which skillful men had come into power. It would run its course, a little more violently perhaps than usual—there would be a re-action at the North and all would be well for another four years.

2. In the next place Mr B. was really powerless. Few men have ever in four years been so completely stripped of real authority. Cold and calculating, with a clear head but no heart, ready at any moment to desert a friend whom he had used in order to secure an enemy whom he wanted to use—with a habit of indirectness that at times almost became falsehood and a wariness that sometimes degenerated into craftiness—with no faith in sentiment and a cynical estimate of men the result of long party experience, and all this justified in his own eyes by the fact, which nobody can dispute who knows him, that he really had no ulterior selfish purpose—that he wished to serve his country and was a man in his individual relations of perfectly clean hands—Mr Buchanan was just the man to utterly belittle a great cause, misunderstand a real national crisis and compromise a great position by small acts and smaller motives. He had identified the Government with himself and to take care therefore of his own position, to save himself embarrassment and mortification, was to protect the government. When Mr Buchanan

therefore became aware of the trouble which was closing all round him—"apres moi le deluge" was his first principle of action. To protract the issue, not to close it, was his policy. Like Heseekiah when the prophet denounced the destruction of his house and the captivity of his children, the piteous burden of his cry was "Is it not good, if peace and truth be in *my* day?"

He therefore diplomatized with those whose action he could not entirely stay. He promised not to force an issue, to receive Commissioners, to refer to Congress and in this policy he persevered even in face of Gen Cass's resignation. But the issue came nevertheless and Maj Andersons removal to Sumter, placed it sharp and sudden before the country. Now this policy of delay and compromise and reference was Mr Buchanans not his cabinets—it was conducted without the intervention of his Northern Members and in private consultations with his Southern—not exactly in official pledges but in conversations with Southern Members of Congress—in adopting suggestions from Floyd and Thompson—and keeping up indirect communications with those in authority and influence in South Carolina. When Andersons conduct made the issue, official action was necessary. Mr Buchanan had to take his choice between two courses, to sustain him or to condemn. The conduct of his officer was in direct contradiction to the whole undercurrent of his policy but not so in regard to the position of his message, nor the official action of the Cabinet. He wavered—but what could he do—Cobb was gone, Floyd went, Thompson and Thomas had to go, the excitement in the South grew fiercer, the act of Anderson had fired the whole train of Southern feeling—to go with the South now was to go entirely with them. Black and Toucey, Stanton and Holt, said decide—whatever you may have done we are uncommitted—keep the word which the South says you have pledged and we resign—we believe in the Union and will not betray it. In the Senate, every State that seceded—and at length even he saw that the secession of six states was certain—swept away his former friends and the Black Republican Majority grew in grim proportions, while the few Southern Senators left bore him no love and owed him no allegiance. He surrendered into the hands of the North and refused to withdraw Anderson. Besides, like the Northern Members of his Cabinet, he was a Northern man. If this revolution was checked he and they would claim credit for their firmness, if it succeeded they were to remain at the North and must be supported by Northern opinion. To those Southern men who were for conciliating and humouring Mr B, this was evident from the first—when the issue came, they and he must separate but they were willing for reasons of their own to make the issue as peaceful as possible and lost nothing by meeting Mr Buchanan, half way. A day or two before I left Washington I called on Judge Black at the State Dep: to tell him goodbye. I liked the Judge very much; he was peculiar almost eccentric in his way, a very simple and somewhat awkward manner, a rumpled look as

if neither his wig nor his clothes would fit his ungainly person, but his conversation was delightful, original and rather quaint in his conceptions and at times wonderfully rich and full in his expression. We had a very curious conversation, all things considered. We first talked about the appointment of the new collector for Charleston upon which I said, "Well Judge if you people of Pennsylvania are not statesmen, at least you are heroes." "How?"—"Why, have you not found a man bold enough to make a martyr of himself by taking the collectorship at Charleston?" "You are joking aren't you—there is no *danger*." "The devil—there isn't. I would not like to be in his place. Why they will hang him to a certainty." "Then by the Lord Jehovah—do it and add murder to your other crimes but you will repent it in sackcloth and ashes—and the Judge hitched up his trousers and walked up and down the room very indignantly." After a hearty laugh I said, "Not exactly hang him Judge, but seriously he will be informed that he cannot assume his office and be politely requested to leave at his earliest possible convenience." "Well, Well"—said the Judge "that wont hurt him and if he cant stay why he'll have to go I suppose." Then the Judge broke out into an eulogy on South Carolina, "There," said he, "a little state no bigger than the palm of my hand, has broken up this mighty empire. Like Athens you controul Greece—you have made and you will controul this revolution by your indomitable spirit. Up to this time you have played your part with great wisdom—unequalled, but now you are going wrong". Then he went into a discussion of the position of things but what seemed to annoy him that we would not call it revolution, that we claimed secession to be a right under the constitution and said what his policy would have been from the first. As I understand him, but I am by no means sure that I did understand him, he would have garrisoned every southern port so that a violent secession would have been hopeless and the State would have been forced to call a convention of states to decide upon the alleged grievances and that convention called upon the re-action at the North would have represented the true conservative element of the nation, have done full justice to the South and thus settled the Union firmly forever. When he was done I said jestingly, "Well if we have made mistakes, some other people have made mistakes too." "Yes," he said—"there were two broad roads to be followed and one narrow strip between where nobody could move and with wonderful ingenuity we have got just on that spot. Yes, you nearly carried your point, you had every thing your own way. As for anybodys word of honour being involved I cant help that. The President must take care of his own honour. We had to take care of the countrys. I dont know anything about that, if he committed himself so much the worse—it was for a good, an honest purpose but that is not our concern. You nearly beat us but we had one card left and fortunately that was a trump, so we beat you."

3. But there was another motive at the bottom of the Presidents

vacillation and apparent weakness. He could not bring himself to take decisive measures in Lincoln's interest. While he was anxious to preserve the Union—was not willing to allow the extent of the danger, his secret sympathy was with the South. In his heart he felt that their protest was his defence. The Black Republican triumph was one especially over him—they had denounced him and his policy—they had taken away his own Pennsylvania—they had personally libelled him and held him up to scorn by the famous Covode Committee. The South had elected him, had supported his administration and after all their indignation to accept Lincoln and submit to Black Republican rule was almost to acquiesce in his condemnation. He had no objections to see the storm rage if it stopped short of shipwreck—to see the Republicans broken to pieces in the very flush of their insolent triumph and a reaction sweep over the North and float the old Democracy into power in 1864. He would not therefore encourage “the rebels”, he would check them as far as he could, but the Constitution had not given him authority, he could not stain his executive robes with the blood of American citizens and if he could fight off the issue instead of fighting it, until Lincoln who had sowed the storm had arrived in person to reap the whirlwind, why that was all the country had a right to expect and he could go home to Wheatlands with a quiet conscience and if the ship of state must go down—at least his hand was not on the helm. Now I could not prove all this but if human nature is human nature it is true and I firmly believe it and it is the only explanation of the extraordinary conduct of the President from the departure of the Commissioners until the inauguration of Lincoln.

Note.

I have omitted to mention above, Mr Cobb's resignation as Secretary of the Treasury, because it was not directly connected with the events to which I was referring. Mr Cobb had early in the summer made up his mind as to what ought to be the consequences of Lincoln's election and as the day of election drew nigh had written to his friends in Georgia that whatever the State might do in that event they must should it occur withdraw his name from before the Legislature as a candidate for the vacant Senatorship U. S. as he could not consent to represent the State under such circumstances and preferred to consider his public life closed. But Mr Cobb was personally much attached to Mr Buchanan. He thought the South owed it to Mr B to save him this issue if possible and moreover there was a greater probability of action on the part of Georgia if the people were called on to resist the inauguration of a Black Republican Administration than if compelled to secede under an Administration which they had brought into power and the course of which had generally met their approbation. He was also anxious that Mr Buchanan's message should take such ground in reference to the great question dividing the country as to justify if possible the course which the South would probably adopt. He therefore determined to

remain until the message went in to Congress and used what influence he possessed in support of that policy which proposed the joint Secession of the Southern States on the 4th March. When the Message went in therefore, he published an address to the people of Georgia declaring his views and as they included both the right and duty of the Secession of that State, he naturally but not abruptly closed his connection with Mr Buchanans administration.

Mr Cobb made a very favourable impression on me. He was a man of amiable and conciliatory temper well adapted to serve as a modifying centre for extreme opinions, with a clear head, very decided opinions himself but always willing to listen to and combine the opinions of others for practical action and as far as I could judge, truly heartily and unselfishly devoted to the cause of the South.

[Mr Cobb with his usual clear judgment and sound common sense retired before the issue became too complicated. The States to which Gov Floyd and Mr Thomson belonged had not yet seceded. Until they did these gentlemen had a perfect constitutional right to remain in the Cabinet for two purposes. 1. Either to devise some plan of compromise or, 2. to maintain if they could the constitutional doctrine which they held, that force could not be used against a seceding State. This was all they did and this they had a right to do. Gov: Floyd refused to use force against South Carolina and the President sustained him until the seizure of Fort Sumter and then changing his policy, Gov Floyd very properly resigned. Mr Thomson, thinking that until this change of policy was carried into action it might be again reversed, remained but in a few days was forced to follow Gov: Floyd and leaving the President free to re-construct his Cabinet which he did by making Mr Holt Sec at War and Mr Stanton Atty General, thus giving it an unity of purpose and an ability which would soon have been felt but for his own persistent and consistent indecision, if that can properly be called indecision which was really a fixed purpose to be undecided.]

The position of all the Southern Members of the Cabint was difficult and anomalous and just as in any other government the Secession of a State would have been absolute rebellion, so in any other kind of Administration, their conduct may have been denounced as treason. But with the theory upon which the South has based its action that the Union was a confederacy the members of the cabinet must be allowed the same freedom of contrave[n]ing the policy of the administration as the states have of destroying the structure of the Constitution. In other words, the Administration being only the official exponent of the constitution in its daily practical life, the moment the Union is disintegrated, so is the cabinet, and the contest there to prevent the power of the Government from interfering against either party on the ground that is the mere agent of both and without independent authority, becomes legitimate. To apply the words treason and treachery therefore to the conduct of the Southern Members of Mr B's Cabinet is to borrow a technical

language from Foreign Governments which has no true application to the circumstances of our own. In fact the condition of the Cabinet was the genuine exponent of the unexampled condition of the Country.

That such a state of things is desirable or profitable either to the character or interest of a Nation, I am far from saying, but it is the inevitable result of our history which in its results has now proved that the Union was only a state of transition and that the U. S were in no true sense ever one nation.

What the new development will be, it is now too early to speculate upon but as a generalization it does not seem to be risking much to say that if there is real homogeneity in the sentiment and interests of the South, it will find its expression in unity of national feeling and centralization of national Government, accelerated or retarded of course by the influence of external events.

[The negotiation which the Commissioners from South Carolina went to Washington to open was never commenced. The Commissioners themselves were admirably selected. They had all filled with distinction very eminent places either in the Federal or State Governments, some of them in both. They were men of decided and varied ability and while they represented the unity of the States purpose, also represented with singular accuracy the minor differences of opinion which existed in the State. They came to Washington with an implicit confidence in Mr Buchanans intention to deal fairly with them and were anxious to do all that was consistent with their sense of duty, to solve the issue as temperately as circumstances would permit and however they may have been controuled by their knowledge of public opinion at home, they were allowed by the Convention which appointed them, unlimited discretion in the discharge of their grave responsibility. That Mr Buchanan was sincere in his desire to meet them in the same spirit is evident from the necessities of his position and his course both before and after their visit. But Major Andersons movement, made the very day of their arrival, complicated the whole subject beyond solution. That Mr Buchanan failed to redeem very solemn pledges when he acquiesced in Major Andersons conduct, there can be no question. But it is a question whether he could have done otherwise. At the commencement of an Administration, with a strong and successful party behind him he could have done it. Perhaps even then with a resolute will and perfect directness of purpose he could have done it. But all substantial authority had departed from him and he was not a man of direct ways. The threat of impeachment with no friendly Senate to sit in judgment stood in his way, popular clamour became loud at the North and as he said to a friend "If I withdraw Anderson from Sumter, I can travel home to Wheatlands by the light of my own burning effigies". His cabinet was resolute, as Mr Stanton expressed himself very strongly to me "You say the President has pledged himself. I dont know it, I have not heard his account but I know you believe it. For the present I will admit it. The President

was pledged. Andersons conduct has broken that pledge. You had two courses to choose. You had a right to either. You could have appealed to the President to redeem his pledge or you could have said the circumstances under which Anderson has acted prove bad faith, we will not trust you any further and then have acted as you saw fit: but you have no right to adopt both—stand on the Presidents pledge and give him the chance to redeem it or take the matter in your own hands. Now you have chosen—you have by seizing the remaining forts and arsenals undertaken to redress yourselves. The Presidents pledge may be broken or not—that *now* concerns him individually—as to the Government you have passed by the pledge and assumed in vindication a position of hostility—with that alone I have to deal.”

But while it was impossible for Mr Buchanan to redeem his word, the Commissioners could accept nothing less. They knew the temper of their people, they knew with what difficulty they had been restrained from seizing Fort Sumter when it was undefended, they knew that the possession of Fort Sumter meant the sealing up of the harbour of Charleston and the collection of Federal Revenue by the Federal navy and they knew that nothing but the practical disavowal of instant removal would convince the State that she had not been treacherously duped. All this they stated frankly to Mr Buchanan in their interview and in their first letter. His reply left little hope that there would be room for negotiation. He refused positively to disavow Major Anderson or to countermand his movement. Even then the Commissioners hesitated to abandon all hope of an arrangement. After careful deliberation, with a full sense of the responsibility of their act, an act indeed touching the utmost verge of their largest discretion, they made as I have already stated through Mr Hunter the proposition that they would engage to restore the forts which had been seized if the President would withdraw Major Anderson from Sumter and return him to Moultrie and with the status thus re-established they were still ready to negotiate. This was declined and Mr Hunters message indicated that active measures had been taken in precisely the contrary direction. Then but not until then did the Commissioners write their concluding letter. It was in no sense a Diplomatic Document. It was formally addressed to the President but in reality to the country. It was meant and ought so to be considered as a vindication of the earnestness and sincerity of the State in the pacific course which she had attempted, as a proof to the South that the issue was not to be avoided and as an explanation and justification of their own conduct in terminating their mission and returning home.]

TRESCOT TO THE GOVERNOR OF SOUTH CAROLINA.²¹

Confidential

To His Excellency

The Governor of the State of So. Ca.

WASHINGTON, D. C

Decem. 14, 1860

Sir

Having resigned my place as Assistant Secretary of State of the U. S. I shall remain here in pursuance of the request of Gov: Gist, conveyed to me in a letter of the 29th Novem. and in conformity with the wishes expressed in the same letter shall submit to your attention such information as I deem either interesting or important in the present condition of public affairs.

Before entering upon the immediate subject of this communication it is proper that I should inform you of an event of very considerable significance which has just occurred. You will have learned from the papers that previous to the delivery of the Presidents Message there was a general apprehension that its publication would lead to a dissolution of the Cabinet. This did not happen, the concessions of the message appeared to have brought about the agreement of the Cabinet upon a common but rather uncertain ground. Immediately after its promulgation however Mr Cobb, the Secretary of the Treasury deemed it his duty to retire from the Cabinet for reasons which he has given to the public. He was succeeded by Gov: Thomas of Maryland whose views are considered as identical with those of the Southern section of the Cabinet and the balance might therefore be fairly held to be undisturbed. Within the last two or three days Gen Cass, the Secretary of State, submitted to the President his opinion that a reinforcement of the garrisons in Charleston Harbour was the imperative duty of the Administration and upon the refusal of the President to concur in that policy, Gen Cass has resigned. His resignation has been accepted and the President thus stands committed to maintain a policy, the advantage of which to South Carolina it is impossible to exaggerate. I have no doubt that the resignation of Gen Cass will be made the subject of universal eulogy at the North and North West and the opportunity be improved for the extremest denunciation of the President. I am satisfied that you will feel with me that such a course on the part of the President deserves the recognition of South Carolina and gives him a claim as far as it can be done consistently with our principles and our interest, that the State should facilitate any honourable accommodation which will avoid collision. It is clear that in a movement like the present it will be impossible to reach any temporary accommodation if both parties stand upon strict logical consequence, there must be a mutual recognition that the position is an anomalous one to be treated with reference to the

²¹ From a press copy, separate from the manuscript of the foregoing narrative. Pickens was inaugurated December 17.

great interests involved rather than to the theoretical consistency of the principles implied.

There is I assume no rational doubt that the Convention of S.C will pass the Ordinance of Secession within a week from its organization. No such doubt exists here—that is considered as an accomplished fact. Upon this occurrence questions demanding immediate solution arise.

1. In reference to U. S. property including the Forts and Garrisons
2. In reference to the execution of the revenue laws
3. In reference to the Postal arrangements.

1. In reference to the Forts and Garrisons I believe that owing to the fact, that the Southern Members of the Cabinet are pledged to resist to resignation any attempt at re-inforcement—that the temper of the President leads him most earnestly as far as his sense of duty will permit to avoid anything that will in the present excited condition of public feeling, provoke conflict—and to the event to which I have referred, that the resignation of the Secretary of State has been accepted because the President would not consent to send more troops into the Harbour, it may safely be inferred that this question is capable of arrangement. But it is scarcely necessary to add that when the resignation of Gen Cass is publicly announced the probability is that a great pressure of Northern opinion will be created for the purpose of forcing the President from the ground which he has taken, clamour which ought not to be allowed to disturb our own public feeling or to force us into precipitate action but which it would be judicious and right to meet by giving to the President whatever support we can under the circumstances.

2. With regard to the revenue laws. It is impossible now to enter into any detail as to these laws but the point to which I would call your attention is that upon the Secession of the State, force need not be resorted to by the Federal Government to produce great confusion and perhaps distress. The resignation of the Collector would by itself if his place were left vacant bring about these results as a cursory inspection of our commercial regulations will shew. I shall only mention one illustration. The Beacon lights and light houses along our coast are Government property and if the Act of Secession prevents their keepers from the discharge of their ordinary duties until that question of proprietorship is settled, they will all go out.

3. The postal regulations. The Post Master General holds that the Ordinance of Secession once passed and notice of that fact communicated to Congress he has no right individually to decide the question but that until it is settled he is bound to continue the Mails wherever there are Post Masters to receive them. If the action of the State or the resignation of the Post Masters, removes the necessary officers he can do nothing because the postal laws require imperatively that no mail shall be *delivered to any but sworn officers of the U.S.*

In view of these difficulties I consulted several Southern Senators whose characters and eminent abilities give weight to their advice.

After a very full and free discussion in which the question submitted was—If South Carolina passes her Ordinance of Secession immediately say within the first week of the session of her Convention—is there a practical and practicable plan of accommodating these difficulties which must arise between the time of her action and the action of other States which shall neither compromise her principles nor her honour. I cannot go now into a detailed account of the very interesting consultation. The result I must briefly indicate. It was this. That the State should pass her Ordinance of Secession definitely clearly and irrevocably declaring the State of South Carolina out of the Union, that then she should appoint a Commissioner or Commissioners to announce to the Government of the U.S. that fact and that they were fully empowered to enter into a Treaty of Arrangement for all points such as public debt, public property etc., etc. And lastly that the Ordinance should state that in order for the orderly and peaceable execution of its provisions all Collectors, Post Masters, Treasury and other officers holding Commissions under the U.S. should be allowed —— days to settle the accounts and close the business of their respective offices, at the end of which time their offices should be considered vacated and abolished.

Whether this period runs with the time allowed the Commissioners or falls short does not make much difference. The Act of Secession is complete, the officers of the Government are allowed such time to settle their accounts etc as would not be denied a dissolving firm and while they are winding up their business the mails could be received, the revenue collected and accounted for and collision thus avoided until the action of other Conventions in January had placed other States in the same position. This plan explains itself so plainly and forcibly that I do not deem it necessary to dwell upon it especially as I have made this letter a longer one than is desirable altho it has seemed to me necessary.

I must therefore defer until another time such information and views as to the general condition of parties and interests here as I wish to submit to your attention.

It is proper to state that in consequence of the resignation of Gen Cass, altho my resignation had been tendered and accepted, I am as a matter of courtesy discharging those duties which belong to the routine of the Department until the appointment of a successor but hope to be entirely relieved by a nomination of a New Sec of State to the Senate on Monday.

I have the honour to be

Sir

Very Respectfully
WM HENRY TRESCOT.

P.S. I must ask your indulgence for a letter written in the midst of constant interruption as you may well suppose under the circumstances but I think it advisable to write by this mail.

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